

The Theology of Food, by Angel Méndez Montoya

Reviewed by Mayra Rivera Rivera

This is a rich, delightful book. To read *The Theology of Food* is to be gently drawn into a celebration of the senses, of the awakening of the senses in relation to divine gifts—gifts that are as irreducibly material as they are spiritual. The noise of a busy market, the smells and changing colors of chiles in the oven, the rich flavors of dark chocolate, sesame and ginger enveloped this reader—already in the first chapter. I was already mesmerized—and salivating! But Méndez insists that God would not leave us there, in a stage of pure anticipation: there is nourishment, even if there is always more to taste. And there is indeed a feast between the covers—the *very* suggestive, picante covers of this book. The practices of cooking and sharing food that it lovingly explores ground not only its understanding of the practice of theology but also of divine creativity and nourishment. As the book nourishes the reader, it also invites her to learn by doing: to participate in the doing of theology that feeds others. What can be more alluring than imagining an alimentary theology as “a culinary feast” that embraces *polygeusia*, a “dynamic multiplicity” of “divine-human *gustus*,” as Méndez describes it.

The alimentary theology that this book proposes, embraces the wisdom of material, bodily experiences, of situated knowledges that are paths to transcendence. The book performs what it describes: a theology that remains open to the gifts of material sustenance and its delights—pleasure welcomed in an attitude of reverence that does not at all renounce enjoyment. It is “attentive to and welcoming of multiple layers” in the preparation of theology. Domestic and communal culinary practices, literary meditations, philosophical discussions, and biblical interpretations are woven in this narrative that makes good to its promise neither “to antagonize nor to assert victory over other approaches,” (9) but rather to explore creative spaces in the “in-betweenness of transcendence and immanence”—even in the midst of “unfinished and conflicting discourses.” A real treat! And a good lesson—culinary and theological. The fact that the book begins with a careful description of the preparation of mole is perhaps surprising, and yet there could be no better image and example for the work. In this recipe, a great variety of ingredients and elaborate culinary processes materialize delicate and powerful interactions between a plurality of traditions, memories, and innovations—all of which carry through Méndez’s rich description of the theological task. It truly informs and illustrates how different contrasting traditions add their own flavor and distinctiveness to

the book, which is, like mole, complexly layered and yet harmonious. One can taste each of these ingredients, and yet each is transformed by the mixture and preparation.

One could develop a meditation for each of the 33 ingredients in the recipe. [don't worry—I won't try!] I am particularly interested in the integration of aesthetic, ethical, and political elements, because too often, theologies that make explicit their ethical commitment and engage in necessary prophetic denunciations, those that vow to stay in touch with the realities of pain, poverty, and hunger of the world, are highly suspicious of delight. Understandably, but sadly, they tend to sacrifice sensual pleasure and may leave us hungry. For Méndez, this is also the risk of strict apophatic discourses. Méndez's book has a taste for the *picante* of prophetic discourses: "that which is spicy makes us alert, attentive, responsive, responsible," he writes. This *picante* coexists with sweet joy, both chiles and chocolate are indispensable in this theological recipe. Thus the aesthetic claims are also deeply ethical ones—theopolitical. Méndez's assertion that "To share bread is to share God," is a bold ethical challenge. Insisting that food matters and that its enjoyment is a relevant theological concern, this alimentary theology also affirms that bodies matter. For it is precisely the dichotomy between matter and divinity, between bodies and spirit, that

makes possible the reduction of creation and bodies to mere commodities for global capitalist exchange. The book works interdisciplinarily to develop a multi-dimensional interpretation of eating and of bodies as individual, social, political, ecological, cosmic, divine. Food is here also the expression of the “interdependence between human communities, of humanity with ecology, of all creation with God” (3).

Picante is, of course, adjusted to taste. Some of you may know that, generally speaking, Puerto Ricans tend to have much less tolerance for picante than Mexicans—in culinary matters, at least. But in this case my palate craving a bit more picante, not only in relation to practices of sharing and withholding nourishment—in and outside Christianity—but also what could emerge from the gastroeroticism that he suggests, following Octavio Paz, especially when Eros is not construed as a lesser other of agape. If the suspicion of taste is related to its connection to carnal appetites, as Méndez observes, what would it mean to contemplate the messiness of desiring bodies craving for food, but also for each other as part of the participation in divine wisdom? This is, of course, beyond the scope of the book. This is just a suggestion for which we might have to wait for the next book—The Theology of Dance, perhaps?

Méndez alimentary theology sees the assumed rift between knowledge and sensibility as a failed vision—indeed a fallen one. Taking us back to the etymological roots of wisdom—*Sapientia*—which means both to have wisdom and to taste; it suggests an intimate, sensory, and participatory understanding of wisdom. As an “intense form of touching” (62), taste involves also judging what is good, and implies the possibility of being affected, transformed and even destroyed. The significance of this interpretation of wisdom is not just epistemological, but also ontological. Sapiential and *Logos* theological traditions, so often assumed to privilege disembodied words over materiality and flesh, reveal in Méndez readings a contrasting view of divine self-giving as food, through which God shares divinity with humanity. “Matter is divinized, but only through its own materiality. Humanity is deified, but only in the midst of its own situatedness”—a situatedness that is, in this theology, profoundly relational.

I cannot rehearse here the rich biblical and theological readings of the book. Let me just say that it yields a theological vision that integrates affectivity, “savoring/tasting becomes a guide for the intellect” (75) and matter and spirit co-constitute one another. It is thus a contribution to the ongoing theological task of overcoming the exile of transcendence from materiality and bodies, insisting on and offering a vision of God intrinsic to

a thoroughly relational cosmos. This is a task to which feminist theologians have been particularly committed, partly because they have historically carried the burden of the abjected flesh. The contribution of *Theology of Food* to this task is a unique and creative—taking us through a new path of taste.¹ [Don't panic, I am not about to claim Méndez as a feminist radical orthodox brother—at least not in public, certainly not here. I truly honor the situated openness that the book performs.] Allow me to expand a bit here. Patriarchal thought has long associated women with nourishing: offering food and being food. Yet this has been the contrasting—if complementary—side of the assumed immateriality of spiritual nourishing and higher forms of wisdom. Happily, complementarity is not what Méndez is proposing, I think. Instead he carefully and gently guides back to the Wisdom tradition to question the separation. The God we find here is not complemented by a lesser feminine side who is in charge of nurturing. God is here the cook, whose “desire becomes present as food” (68). [I'd love to hear Méndez comments on this.] The images contrast, though by no means exclude, familiar ones of God as architect or poet, roles where the distance between creator and created are more clearly asserted. The characters that inspire this theological proposal are rich and bold. Tita, the main character of Laura

¹ Food and eating are understood here “from a perspective of life rather than death” (85), thus performing another one of feminists recurring themes: the critique of necrophilia in philosophical discourses.

Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*, Divine Sophia, Babett, the celebrated chef of Isak Dinesen's *Babette's Feast*, and Jesus of Nazareth, all contribute their special touches to this theology, and the understated gender troubling. If I understood it correctly, a similar dynamism is claimed for immanence and transcendence, which are not merely two complimentary poles, nor an ontological divide between creation and God, for creation is not pure immanence, nor is the immanent surpassed by pure transcendence. Or maybe I am projecting my own interests here...

I would be happy to end here, urging you to savor the book for yourselves. But the tone of the book invites adding our own ingredients to its hybrid mix. So here are questions that are particularly mine.

Desire exists not only in human, but also in a relational God, Méndez argues. The Trinitarian relationality exemplifies a mode of desire that is not lack, but a flow enacted in plenitude. From there, desires flows into creation, incarnation, and the Eucharist, where desire becomes bread. Humans savor God's own desire in a sensual and erotic knowing. My question focuses on this God who desired enough to become flesh and bread. Does the incorporation of humanity in God through feeding satisfy God, however differently and asymmetrically? Does it touch God? Does God have a taste for human delight? Or is divine enjoyment confined to intra-Trinitarian

alimentation? Sophia's enjoyment in creation seems to suggest otherwise. Her in-betweeness seems to compromise any strict metaphysical boundary, crossing the borders in both directions. Yet to limit receptivity to Sophia would risk re-instating the metaphysical divisions that the book resists. The statement that "human creativity is really re-creation," "nothing metaphysically new" leaves me wondering if the exuberant human responses to divine excess—the polygeusia and the polydoxy—are received by God. Does hunger move the divine? [I think this question is related to the next.]

As someone who spends a lot of time on the margins of institutional church—indeed someone neither too radical nor too orthodox—but who devotes a lot of energy and time to cooking and sharing meals I wonder about the relationship between these two forms of nourishment and sharing. The book consistently affirms the Eucharist as a radical expression of God's *for-you*. And yet, given that the book also affirms creation as a sign of communion and the means of deification—where we "become God through God becoming us—I am not sure if the Eucharist radicalizes this expression by being a different kind of nourishment or whether what makes it different is that it is a space where nourishment is received as God-given. In other words, is it a different kind of nourishment or a different response to divine nourishment?

In conclusion, I want to say that this book is timely, beautifully written and passionate. I cannot wait to teach it in class, as I have parts of its former version, to see the openings that it will offer to students who are hungry for theologies that nourishes their lives. Thank you, Angel, for this contribution.